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East Timor Hearing, December 4, 1979, Asia/Pacific Subcommittee

Statement for Tom Harkin

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, Ladies and Gentlemen: I would like to thank you for this opportunity to express my concern about the enormous human tragedy in East Timor. I appreciate Chairman Wolff's efforts to thoroughly investigate the suffering in East Timor and the US role in alleviating that suffering.

I am not an expert in disaster assistance, nor am I an expert on events in East Timor. But I have been following the plight of the East Timorese for the last six months, through reports from Australian, British, and Indonesian journalists, church and relief aid officials, American specialists on the area, and human rights advocates.

Though the devastation of the East Timorese people has not received the attention in the American press that the Cambodian famine has, I have also investigated shocking reports which recently appeared in the American media. I have been in close contact with East Timorese refugees and clergy in Portugal and Australia who have received letters and reports smuggled out of East Timor testifying to the severe human rights problems there. Because of my personal interest in the plight of the East Timorese, I welcome this opportunity to discuss their present situation and their future.

I believe that our primary obligation at this time is to make every effort to contribute the food, personnel, and

money needed to aid the East Timorese people. I firmly support a vigorous response to the famine and disease in East Timor, and generous funding for a long-term relief program and continuous monitoring of the hunger situation there. Nonetheless, I feel that in the interests of a sound and humane US foreign policy, a thorough discussion of the events in Indonesia which led to the present tragedy, and US involvement and knowledge of these events is absolutely necessary.

As everyone in this room is aware, Indonesia invaded the fledgling nation of East Timor in December of 1975. Although the Indonesian government's four year blockade of foreign journalists, international relief organizations, church groups, and foreign observers prevents us from knowing exactly what happened in East Timor during this time, the presence of 400,000 sick and starving refugees today is an overwhelming testimony to the devastation wrought in the period of time since the invasion.

Indonesian officials blame the famine on decades of primitive "slash and burn" agricultural methods and the 1975 civil war. However, an international Red Cross team, which worked in East Timor for three months before the invasion, denied at the time that there was a serious food or refugee problem. According to area specialists, slash and burn

agricultural practices had not had any significant, harmful impact on East Timor's mountain ecology by late 1975. Unlike other islands in the Indonesian archipelago, the soil in the mountains has sustained its productivity. Scholars attribute the breakdown of slash and burn practices in West Timor to the largescale introduction of cattle herds by the Dutch during the colonial period. Thus, it is ludicrous to assert that after centuries of slash and burn agriculture, East Timor's mountains have suddenly become unarable. Despite the cyclical hunger problem common to East Timor as well as most of Indonesia, the enormity of the hunger and disease in East Timor today, and the official reports that as many as 100,000 East Timorese have died in the last four years are clearly a result of the political developments on the island. Clandestine news reports, letters smuggled out of the island and the reports of church and aid officials in Portugal and Australia indicate that today's all but total famine is a result of intense Indonesian military activities in East Timor -- search and destroy missions, saturation bombing of fields, hamlets, and homes, and the constant flight of the civilian population who were unable to plant and harvest their food crops.

The Indonesian government's refusal to allow international relief organizations or even church officials to operate in East Timor for the last four years is an indication

of abuse and neglect so thorough that I feel our Department of State and this Congress must carefully examine our own involvement in the subjugation of East Timor and our future relations with the Indonesian government. In particular, we must examine the use of US made arms, which, Section 502B notwithstanding, were provided to Indonesia at a crucial time in their annexation of East Timor. We bear an enormous responsibility for the starvation and suffering in East Timor today. I believe that, consistent with existing legislation, our military assistance to Indonesia must be re-evaluated in light of the appalling human rights conditions in East Timor that such military assistance helped perpetrate.

Knowing that the United States has made a commitment of funds to the International Red Cross and Catholic Relief Service, it is my particular concern that food distribution is monitored carefully and continuously. Because of the nature of the Indonesian invasion of East Timor and of the continuing opposition to Indonesian rule, I would hope that this Administration would demand the same accountability from our aid operations in East Timor that we have demanded in the case of Cambodia. Additionally, there is much reliable evidence that relief supplies and food sent by the Australian government to East Timor over the last three years have been diverted for profit by the Indonesian armed forces and refugee camp officials. Because of the desperate human need

in East Timor, I hope that there will be sufficient numbers of international observers to administer these aid programs and prevent interference with aid operations in any way.

Because of continued East Timorese opposition to Indonesian rule, the East Timorese Regional government insisted on handling every dimension of past aid efforts. I hope, Mr. Chairman, that this political problem does not interfere with outside monitoring and administration of current relief programs. Given the enormous numbers of East Timorese affected and the wide geographic distribution of refugee camps, it seems unlikely that the CRS can effectively maintain tight control over their program with no full-time non-Indonesian staff in the area. Similarly, I fear that the ICRC cannot effectively monitor and administer their desperately needed emergency feeding and medical programs with only one non-Indonesian doctor and nurse. I expect that this Committee and our Department of State will be investigating any possible inadequacies in these programs due to the Indonesian government's unwillingness to allow foreign personnel in to East Timor.

I had the opportunity to discuss this problem with the Indonesian Embassy's Deputy Chief of Mission, Dr. Jalal and the Embassy's Head of Political Division, Mr. Jousoef on October 30. I was assured at that time that the Indonesian government had placed no restrictions on international

observers, international relief programs, or international journalists. I questioned them further to be sure that I had heard correctly, and was again assured that East Timor was completely open to international access.

After checking with Catholic Relief Service, it was reported to me that, contrary to the promises I received in my office on this subject, the CRS was indeed significantly limited in the number of foreign personnel allowed into the area. In particular, a top CRS official who recently visited East Timor, Father Charlebois, indicated to my staff that CRS had requested a large scale emergency nutrition program to be administered by an American nutritionist but was refused by the Indonesian government. In view of the United States' cordial relations with the government of Indonesia, I hope that this Committee and the Department of State will investigate further into this problem and urge cooperation on this matter of foreign personnel and continual monitoring of human rights violations in East Timor. Additionally, I believe that it is important that the ICRC be given free access to all parts of East Timor. This is particularly important given the reports of continued fighting in a number of areas. The ICRC should be allowed to monitor both side's compliance with relevant international statutes concerning the conduct of war.

In conclusion, I want to re-emphasize that our immediate attention must be focused upon the humanitarian needs in East Timor and every effort must be made by this Congress and this Administration to generously assist in the alleviation of suffering in East Timor. But our experience around the world has shown us that it is not enough to provide food and medicine to a victimized and devastated people. We must at some point address the serious political problems that have precipitated the tragedy. One of these is the policy of resettling hundreds of thousands of mountain dwellers in camps under the control of the Indonesian authorities. This program constitutes a significant human rights violation that could seriously hinder the process of returning the survivors of this war and famine to self-sufficiency. The forced integration of East Timor and the denial of self-determination today are integrally related to the hunger and suffering of the East Timorese that we are addressing today. It is not enough for us to simply provide disaster assistance. We must act as well to bring a resolution to these political problems through every diplomatic and political means possible.